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## Introduction

What do we really know about power in Russia?

Scholars generally characterize the structures of power in Russia – the constitution and laws as they are practiced (and sometimes as they are written), the in-built advantages that the state has in virtually all interactions with citizens, and the observed quiescence of the populace without too much observable coercion – as being towards the less democratic end of the spectrum that runs between democracy and autocracy (see, for example, Fish 2017, Gel'man 2015, Stoner 2012). The structures of rentierism are also clearly visible in the 'ecstatic fusion' (to borrow a term from Vladimir Putin) of political and economic power (Dawisha 2014, Gustafson 2012, Hale 2015). Similar judgments are passed on the agents of power: scholars broadly characterize the elite as powerful and the masses as disenfranchised. It is not the purpose of this article to suggest that any of these judgments are untrue. Rather, the aim here is to demonstrate that they are insufficient.

The argument for insufficiency is plain enough. Nothing that we know about the structures or agents of power in Russia explains why, for instance, the state backs down in the face of a few thousand truck drivers angry over a new road tax, but does not yield to tens of thousands of Muscovites upset about the pending demolition of their homes. If the state is structurally powerful, why does it not always get what it wants? If the communities of interest among elite agents – those closest to the commanding heights of the state and the economy – are so clear, why are their obvious advantages sometimes unable to overcome even meekly expressed consternation from below?

If there is a degree of caricature to these rhetorical questions, it serves to underscore the limitations of the discipline from which they emerge. While the contemporary study of Russian politics does not want for nuance or a recognition of complexity, it still tends to study power – as does most of political science

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– by examining institutions and formal political behaviors. Implicit in such an approach is a concept of power as a *thing*, which can be won or lost, held or relinquished, amassed or dissipated. As a result, it would seem reasonable to look for the agents who hold it and the structures that shape it.

Casting a sociological eye on the question, however, suggests an alternative conceptualization of power as a *process*, the force that is generated and exerted when certain things are done in certain ways. In such an approach, power does not rest with the powerful, to be exerted on the powerless; instead, it is jointly produced by the repeated interactions among those whose interests and understandings at least partly diverge. Precisely by blurring the divide between structure and agency, a process-centered approach allows us to see more clearly the ways in which the collective behavior of individual actors – including mass actors – becomes a structural factor in the exercise of political power (Giddens 1984). And that, in a nutshell, is the argument presented here: despite the seeming consolidation of autocratic rule in post-Soviet Russia, significant ‘power’ can be an often is exerted by the country’s ‘powerless’ masses.

With that in mind, this article begins with a clarification of concepts and theoretical purpose, followed by a brief review of ideas about collective action in post-Soviet Russia. From there, I will examine four cases in which sweeping socio-economic reforms launched from above foundered on the shoals below. Central to these studies and the argument as a whole is the idea of ‘aggressive immobility’: the purposeful and concerted defense by citizens of a weakly institutionalized state of personal position and advantage. This thought will be revisited and expanded upon in the concluding section.

## Concepts and Concepts

This is an *essai* – in the proper sense of an *attempt* – in the historical political sociology of contemporary Russia. Specifically, it aims to address the question of power; more specifically still, it asks not to whom power accrues (as this seems a largely settled question), but to what extent we might discern structures that govern the use of power. The essay purposefully avoids attaching any possessives (i.e., *Putin’s*) or adjectives (i.e., *authoritarian*) to *Russia*, because to do so would be to imply an argument of causation: either that contemporary Russia is a product of Putin’s agency, or that it is captured by the structural logic of authoritarianism. One or more of these sorts of causal arguments may, of course, be true, but the author is not sufficiently confident that he knows which one(s), and so, for the purpose of this exercise, all are omitted at the outset.

The core theoretical conceit in this essay is simple. Rather than being unproblematically ascribed to constitutionally or notionally empowered individuals, groups or institutions, power here is understood to be produced in an iterative process of challenge and resistance, the results of which are then crystallized in the institutions of domination that structure what Fligstein and McAdam (2012) call a strategic action field. One of the results of this process-oriented point of view is that there is no power as such in a settled field: once institutions are crystallized, behavior is shaped by expectations, rather than by coercion. It is only when a challenge emerges – and either succeeds in overturning the incumbent order or is fought off – that power is discovered.

Russia provides an ideal setting to practice this approach to the study of power precisely because it is so resistant to institutional crystallization – and thus so rife with challenges. It is generally argued that the resistance to institutionalization in Russia is an elite-driven thing, and certainly there is reason to believe that Russian elites find this unsettled field profitable (at least, those who have managed to prosper continue to have an interest in the perpetuation of the conditions that allowed them to do so). It is less often recognized just how interested Russian citizens themselves have become in deinstitutionalization. After all, whatever prosperity has been built in post-Soviet Russia has been built in precisely this deinstitutionalized environment. In the early years, the proper preposition may well have been “despite”: the coping mechanisms described by Ashwin (1999), Burawoy *et al* (2000) and others were nobody’s best-case scenario. But a quarter century later, “despite” has become “because of”: Russians have learned to internalize the country’s uncertainties, not merely to adapt to them.

In what follows, I will review four cases of ‘liberalizing’ reforms pursued under Putin: the introduction of the ‘Unified State Exam’ for higher education; the so-called ‘monetization’ of social benefits; housing reform and the creation of condominium associations; and the attempt to deal with the country’s single-industry ‘monotowns’. These cases are selected because – unlike the road tax that so irked long-distance truckers, or the proposed demolition of thousands of five-story buildings in Moscow – they do revolve around a core of text-book rationality (the quality of the respective textbooks aside) and are not obviously driven by corruption or rent-seeking. Thus, there is no inherent, in-built moral affront that would offend a Russian citizen of indeterminate political views simply of its own accord. But they all involve a shift in institutional context for the citizens affected, they all provoke a response of one kind or another, and in no case does the government achieve all of its stated aims. Because we are interested in whether people are learning, the cases will be dealt with roughly in chronological order (though there is some overlap).

What we find across the cases, I argue, is the grassroots version of what Joel Hellman famously described as the ‘partial reform equilibrium’ (1998). In Hellman’s argument – which has by now become part of the standard explanation of the breakdown of what many in the early 1990s assumed would be liberalizing projects – elites who ‘won’ during early phases of the post-communist reform process found that further reform would run counter to their interests, and thus mobilized (conspiratorially or otherwise) to stop it. Moving towards what North, Wallis & Weingast called an ‘open-access order’, in which the power of the state would be used equitably and impersonally to enforce the rights of all citizens, would inherently disenfranchise those who had a privileged enforcement rights in what amounted to a ‘limited-access order’ (North, Wallis & Weingast 2009). Most explorations of the ‘partial reform equilibrium’, however, begin and end with the elite, demonstrating and explaining their actions and inactions (see, for example, Fish 2005, Gel’man 2015, and Markus 2015).

The argument here is that Russian elites have not been alone in supporting – and often powerfully so – the maintenance of the existing order. Implicit in most of the arguments building on Hellman has been the idea that citizens are hostage to the desires of the elites, and certainly it would be difficult to argue that ordinary Russians in the early 1990s would elected to pursue this particular political-economic route. A quarter century later, though, it is reasonable to explore the ways in which Russians’ own

livelihoods have become bound up in the seeming dysfunction of the system as it currently is. What is referred to here as ‘aggressive immobility’ reflects the desire and ability of ordinary Russians to protect whatever modicum of security and prosperity they have gained, and recognizes that even those reforms evidently aimed at relaxing the grip of corruption and undue elite influence may seem threatening.

Before proceeding, a definition of power is in order. Following Ermakoff (2008), I share an unease with the conventional approach that equates power to coercion (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992). The threats that induce actors to forfeit what might otherwise have been their own interests are, as Ermakoff notes, often diffuse and themselves lacking in agency. Thus, “Threats do not work as such,” Ermakoff writes. “They work when groups allow themselves to be impressed” (2008, 64). And that allowance itself emerges as the product of processes of interaction, both within and between groups: in the end, we acquiesce to power (or believe that we wield it) most often because we see similar beliefs reflected in the behaviors and discourses of others. (Here, see also Chwe 2001: throughout human history, observing how other people observe – watching people watch other people – has been at the core of the rituals through which domination is construed.) This twist on the conception of power-as-coercion adds an important element of strategic cognition. It does not deny the facts of threat and coercion, but it prompts us to take seriously the ways in which coercion is understood by those whom we analytically believe to have been coerced (even if they do not always recognize that label).

Following, again, Fligstein and McAdam (2012), every strategic action field consists of dominant “incumbents” and dominated “challengers”, but relatively few of these “challengers” openly contest their subordinated status. Those dominated groups that do not present an active challenge tend to understand power relationships in ways that are not identical to the understandings of the dominant groups, but that are *congruent* with those understandings. They thus justify their own denial of their own power. If this kind of self-denial is indeed the most commonly found condition, then most social groups – indeed, most individuals – are in abdication of most of their potential power most of the time. This provides cognitive benefits and allows for social and institutional peace and settlement, which brings material benefits even to those who are dominated. But those benefits come at an obvious cost.

Thus construed, the exercise of power as such becomes a relatively rare phenomenon. Power is not present in a settled strategic action field. Or, put more precisely, it is not held by actors. In a truly settled field, incumbents and challengers find themselves in their superior and subordinate roles through force of habit rather than coercion, while structures of governance and resource distribution are little more than vestiges of prior settlements. Power in this setting must be discovered – or rediscovered – through contestation. In a settled field, the willingness and ability of incumbents to defend and of challengers to challenge are fundamentally uncertain, and thus the actual distribution of power unknown – or, in fact, unestablished. Power is thus the *terra incognita* to which claims are staked. It is the inverse of uncertainty: the more of the *terra incognita* that is explored, the more the boundaries and mettle of social groups are tested, the more familiar the landscape becomes and the clearer the contours of power that emerge, for there is no sense in fighting when the outcome is clear. Thus, the battle is over uncertainty itself, over the right to claim that undiscovered country and marshal its untapped resources to one’s own cause.

## Aggressive Immobility

That the idea uncertainty should figure prominently in discussions of power in Russia is no surprise. The process that led to the birth of the independent Russian Federation consisted in large measure of the breakdown of signaling mechanisms – of the economic signals bound up in prices and currency, of the political signals bound up in ideology, and finally of the threat signals bound up in the public use of force – and Russia thus staggered into existence in a state of utter confusion.<sup>3</sup> The failure of the early Russian governments to overcome this uncertainty – whether by overcoming hyperinflation, entrenching the ownership of property, crystallizing an electoral system or reaching a federal settlement – has been amply documented (McAuley 1997). But a number of analysts also began to point out the ways in which uncertainty itself was not just dragging on, but perhaps being purposefully dragged on. This was the crux both of the ‘partial reform’ argument promulgated by Hellman (1998) – in which those who were able to use their proximity to decision-makers to profit from informational imbalances became interested in seeing those imbalances preserved – and of Ledeneva’s explication of “How Russia really works” (2006; the answer is “informally”). For a rent-seeking political and economic elite, then, what began to take shape was a system in which power and wealth were produced by powerful expectations of informal reciprocity, coupled with deliberate formal dissimulation, in which uncertainty provides both the fuel and the lubrication to keep the machine running (Hale 2015; Markus 2015).

What of the masses? The coping mechanisms described as ‘patience’ and ‘involution’ by Ashwin and Burawoy *et al*, respectively, allowed many Russians to survive the dislocations of transition, by relying on informal arrangements imbued with trust and solidarity and avoiding formal entanglements wherever possible. As the Russian economy began to grow, however, and as many Russians began to enjoy a prosperity they had never before known, these practices remained. Thus, the access to the means of production that workers had used to supplant unavailable consumption for localized networks of social solidarity in the 1990s is still today used in much the same way – and endowed with the same social meaning – despite the changed economic circumstances (Morris 2012). Through these and other means, Russians seemed to retain what Gudkov calls “the inertia of passive adaptation” – in other words, the learned habit of muddling through.

While many Russians are, to be sure, excellent muddlers-through, I have taken issue in an earlier essay with the idea that Russians are passive. Rather, I have argued that they are “aggressively immobile”, precisely because they have come to rely on highly localized and particularized solutions to the problems of daily life – solutions that would be vitiated by any kind of dramatic change (Greene 2011). Given this aggressive immobility, Russians could be expected to react unfavorably to any change that would undermine their ability to cope, their individualized arrangements and bulwarks against uncertainty. Moreover, this unfavorable reaction should be expected to take the form of social mobilization – of protest – if the grievance was the result of a cohesive and coherent action by the state

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<sup>3</sup> The use of the term ‘confusion’ is deliberate, following Kurzman (2004, 335): “To the extent that the rules of the game stay relatively constant, we expect the unexpected. But when we sense that the rules of the game are suddenly changed, and we no longer know what to expect, that is confusion. To attempt a more formal definition, confusion is the recognition of deinstitutionalization.”

or its representatives, thus allowing citizens to perceive a collective solution to their individual problems (Greene 2014).

Periodically, the Russian ruling elite have put this expectation to the test. A raft of neoliberal and rationalizing reforms throughout the 2000s – involving housing, social benefits, education and a raft of other issues – have provoked a range of mass responses (and non-responses), including protest sufficient to force the state to back down. Several of these contests are live at the time of this writing: the tussle over the proposed demolition of more than 4,500 apartment buildings in Moscow, for example, or the long-running skirmish with truckers over road taxes. The question here is, is anyone learning anything? If power, as I have suggested above, is established through the interaction of agents and then becomes embedded – through learning – in the structure of expectations, what, if any, elements of structure have emerged in Russia?

### **Reforming Higher Education**

The beginning of Vladimir Putin's reign is associated in most observers' minds – and perhaps in the minds of many ordinary Russians as well – with moves to consolidate state control over television, the hydrocarbon sector and the parliament, with the exit of Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky from the commanding heights of the Russian political economy, and with the ballyhooed construction of the 'vertical of power'. A somewhat more charitable list might also include tax reform, particularly the introduction of the flat 13 percent income tax, widely credited with helping to get a dysfunctional personal tax system back on the rails. But within a year of becoming president, Putin also began to oversee the implementation of a sweeping change to higher education: the introduction of the Unified State Exam (here, the USE; in Russian, the ЕГЭ).

As with most major reforms, discerning motivation is difficult, but at least some of the state's goals seem clear enough. Traditionally, entry to universities had been obtained by sitting exams administered by the universities themselves, in their halls and by their professors. This system had three unintended consequences that appeared to be of concern to the government: first, it limited mobility, as only those students whose parents could afford the trip could even seek (much less achieve) admission to universities far from home; second, it contributed to imbalances in the higher education system as a whole, with wildly varying admission standards; and third, the system was riddled with corruption. The USE was designed to help deal with all three problems.

Whatever the reasons might have been for government policy in higher-education reform, little of it seems to have been directly in pursuit of rents. Gounko and Smaele (2007) find that the international environment – including job markets, but also direct pressure from international financial institutions, standards agencies, and so on – exerted significant “coercive, mimetic, normative and discursive pressures” both on universities themselves and on the Russian educational authorities to reform. Estimates of the size of the corruption market by the early 2000s in Russian higher education, meanwhile, ranged widely, from \$520 million to \$5 billion; the latter, if true, would have been double the state's education budget. Much of this seemed to involve low-level interactions between students

(and/or their parents) and academics, with some lecturers demanding money in return for results, and some students offering money in return for entrance (Temple and Petrov 2004).

The government introduced the USE experimentally in five regions in 2001; the number expanded to 16 in 2002, 47 in 2003, 65 in 2004 and was implemented in all regions by 2008.<sup>4</sup> Using the USE as a university entrance system almost immediately had a significant positive impact on mobility. While the overall number of people gaining admission to university remained flat, geographical and social mobility was boosted, with particularly beneficial effects for young people living in rural communities and/or in blue-collar households, as well as for applicants whose parents had not themselves attended university (Efendiev and Reshetnikova 2004).

But that was not the perception. In the early years of the reform, at exam time the headlines resounded with stories of school-teachers handing out answers together with the test papers, and of tests so badly written as to be of dubious value. Many Russians objected to the tests for the same reasons that people around the world object to standardized tests in education: true academic aptitude does not easily conform to standardized measurement. But such objections masked – or at least coincided with – another, unspoken complaint: for parents seeking to get their kids a leg up in life, the old system, while difficult and corrupt, was at least legible. The new system was impersonal (by design!) and thus cut across the ‘involved’, personalized approaches to problem-solving that had been proven to work.

Thus, rather than eradicate corruption, the USE pushed corruption from the university level down to schools, where the test is administered (Eliseev 2011). (Ironically, this created constituencies in favor of the USE – for mercantile reasons – in one of the locales where resistance had initially been greatest.) Levada Center surveys conducted in 2013 reported that 34 percent of respondents thought that bribery in university admissions had remained unchanged or grown after the introduction of the USE, while only 13 percent thought it had lessened (Denisova-Schmidt and Leontyeva 2014). Thus, at the grass-roots level the introduction of the USE sparked low-level sabotage but no overt protest (as predicted – the threat was incoherent and non-cohesive, and also not concentrated in time and space). Some parents reportedly began seeking ways of accessing the loopholes in the new university entrance system, including through *olimpiady* and medical and social exclusions.

But it was not only at the grassroots level that the government faced resistance. The USE was opposed both by the elite universities (who saw it as a threat to their rarified status) and by more commercially oriented establishments, who happily admitted large numbers of poorly qualified but financially lucrative applicants (Savitskaia 2003). Various managerial reforms aimed at creating consolidation in higher education – including but not limited to the introduction of the USE – eventually ran into stiff resistance from the country’s best universities, which demanded that exceptions be made, in order to allow them to maintain (or improve) the international prestige that the Kremlin so evidently craved. In fact, when the USE law came up for a vote in the Duma, it was virtually only United Russia deputies who voted for it (Starodubtsev 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> For a full timeline, see:

[https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%95%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9\\_%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9\\_%D1%8D%D0%BA%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%95%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9_%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9_%D1%8D%D0%BA%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD)



Thus, the Russian government's evident attempt to increase mobility, incentivize performance and reduce corruption was undermined both from the bottom (as parents sought and found new forms of corruption) and from the middle (as universities sought more control). At all levels, no one seemed to trust their ability to achieve their desired results in an environment without personalized problem-solving mechanisms and predetermined outcomes. Despite the fact that the reform actually worked, everyone preferred to be able to engineer their own solutions.

## Reforming the Welfare State

In the early part of his rule, Putin pursued both a raft of neoliberal socio-economic reforms – in the social safety net, health care, housing, education and elsewhere, which had the effect of putting more distance between the state and the citizen – and an increasingly aggressive agenda of socio-political illiberacy, through tighter control over the media, political contestation and the public space in general. Hemment (2009) argues that the emergence of groups like *Nashi* – government-backed pseudo-movements saturated with statist ideology – was at least in part an attempt to reestablish some of the traction that liberalizing socio-economic reforms had removed. Nowhere was that loss of traction made more evident than in the case of benefits reform.

Post-Soviet Russia inherited from the Soviet Union – and then expanded of its own volition – a range of benefits due to various categories of citizens: to pensioners and veterans, to the working poor and parents of large families, to the victims of Chernobyl and Stalin-era repression, and so on. As conceived, most of these benefits were to be delivered in what in Russian is referred to as “natural form”: i.e., if a pensioner is entitled to subsidized pharmaceuticals or a free bus pass, they are given these goods and services at a reduced (or nil) cost at the point of service; the government would then make up the provider's ‘loss’ through a range of subventions.

In 2004, the Russian government passed legislation to change all of this. Save for a very small number of exceptions (orphans, for example), benefits would be delivered to recipients in cash; the reform thus became known as the ‘monetization of benefits’. Subsidies and subventions are fertile ground for theft and corruption, but even in the best of circumstances they create significant waste. A policy of providing every pensioner with a free bus pass (and thus paying the transportation companies a subvention based on the number of pensioners in the locality) assumes that every pensioner wants or needs a bus pass. The same is true for almost every category of benefit: the ‘natural benefits’ system assumes identical needs and consumption patterns across all beneficiaries. Monetization is a textbook solution: give people money and let them spend it as they see fit, and both waste and theft are automatically minimized.

The first round of anti-monetization protests struck in the summer of 2004, when the legislation was passed. Perhaps because those protests were led by the radical-theatrical National Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov, the government failed to take them seriously and pressed on with plans to implement the reforms in 2005 (Papp 2005). The protests of January-February 2005, however, got a bit more attention: they were the first nationwide marches since Putin's ascent to power, and also the first time

he was burnt in effigy (Petrakova and Biserov 2005). Putin himself remained largely silent on the issue, leaving it to Minister for Social Development Mikhail Zurabov and Deputy Prime Minister Aleksander Zhukov to defend the reform. It did not help matters on the streets, however, that Zhukov delivered his most full-throated promise to press ahead with monetization while at a banking forum in Zurich (RBK 2005).

On the grassroots level, the cash-for-benefits reform was fundamentally undermined by a lack of transparency: there was no way for benefit recipients to see how their in-kind benefits would translate into cash, and thus no trust that this would happen in a manner that would be sufficient (Alexandrova and Struyk 2007). Note that the accent here is on sufficiency, not fairness: would the money received be enough to purchase all the transportation and healthcare to which they had become accustomed? Russian pensioners and other *l'gotniki* knew to what they had been entitled and from whom to receive it, such that even when there was not quite enough to go around – as was frequently the case with subsidized pharmaceuticals – they knew who could help them solve the problem. As with the introduction of the USE, the cash-for-benefits reform was unsettling precisely because it was depersonalizing: if the extra money that landed post-reform in pensioners' bank accounts was not sufficient to get by, there was no one to talk to.

Again as with the higher-education reform described earlier, the government also had to worry about resistance from the middle. Powerful regional leaders – including then Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and then Kemerovo Region Governor Aman Tuleev – openly railed against Zhukov and Zurabov (though not against Putin) and used their own budgets to restore the 'natural' benefits wherever possible (Piatiletova 2005, Regnum 2009, Wengle and Rasell 2008). As a result, by the summer of 2005 – half a year after implementation began and only a year after the law was passed – it was declared largely a bust (Regnum 2005). There was, it turned out, a confluence of interests between pensioners and at least those regional politicians who had built their political machines on the back of patronage: Luzhkov, Tuleev and others have always (while in power) ensured that their *l'gotniki* are treated better than in the country as a whole, and they make sure that the *l'gotniki* know to whom gratitude is due. It was, then, not only the *l'gotniki* themselves who stood to lose from the reform.

## Housing Reform

At around the same time that the government was reeling from the self-inflicted wounds of benefits reform, it decided to take on another thorny issue: housing. In preparing the 2005 revisions to the housing law, the government sought to address two particularly vexing problems. One, as ever, was corruption, in this instance in the housing maintenance and utility sector, which had come to be dominated by inefficient, rent-leaking municipal bureaucracies. The second was a comparatively new problem, albeit with longstanding roots. The housing privatization program that began at the end of the Soviet Union (and continues to the present day) allowed people living in multi-family apartment blocks to take ownership of their individual units but left unsettled the ownership of the building and, importantly, the land underneath it; these, in turn, remained largely municipal property. By the mid-2000s, however, booming real estate markets in Moscow and other major cities often meant that the

land was worth considerably more than the homes that stood on it, and there was concomitant pressure to free up land for re-development. When this happened, however, homeowners were only compensated for the value of their flats, while the value in the land accrued to the city – providing yet another opportunity for corruption.

The solution the government settled on for both problems in the 2005 housing reform was to mandate the creation of Homeowners Associations (here, HOAs; in Russian, ТСЖ). These HOAs would be private, non-commercial entities, jointly owned by all of the homeowners in a given building (or, if desired, group of buildings). Upon creation of an HOA, the municipal authorities would be required to transfer ownership of both the building and the land to the HOA, to be held in equal share by each member. The HOA would then decide whether to remain with municipal maintenance and utility providers, or to go out onto the private market; would set schedules and fees for improvements and maintenance; and would take responsibility for the general disposition of the commonly held property (including any eventual sale). As with the cash-for-benefits reform, it was a textbook approach.

That the middle-level elites should have been a problem is unsurprising and was, in fact, something for which the government was most likely prepared. City authorities in Moscow in particular actively sabotaged the process, refusing (on technicalities) to transfer land ownership to HOAs (while happily transferring the buildings, and then sending inspectors to require repairs after decades of delayed maintenance). Homeowners not infrequently found that they had voted – without ever actually doing so – to join mammoth new HOAs, which in turn quickly elected to hire private building managers at exorbitant fees; these private managers then turned out to be the same people who had been mismanaging their buildings as city employees prior to the reform. This was to be expected.

The unexpected resistance came from ordinary citizens. In older buildings, socio-economic heterogeneity proved a barrier to coordination: interests and abilities were too disparately defined and distributed among neighbors. In these older buildings, in the relatively rare cases when genuine homeowners' associations were created, it was usually a bottom-up process that built on existing networks of solidarity, unlike in newer buildings, where the developers generally led the process. Newer buildings, built in the 2000s, had more homogenous communities, facilitating both decision-making and issue-framing – although this was frequently mitigated by the very large number of people resident in these often mammoth housing complexes. And even where associations did emerge, the problems they face are familiar to students of collective action: free-riding, deficiencies of democratic process, and neglect of the 'commons' (Vihavainen 2009). Many Homeowners' Association members continue to relate to the Association as a service provider, rather than as a community of which they are constituents, with all of the concomitant impacts for trust and engagement that attitude implies (Vihavainen 2011).

In a survey experiment conducted more than a decade after the reform was launched, researchers found that knowing more about HOAs did not improve Russian respondents' opinion of the concept, nor did it increase their likelihood of participating in an HOA. In fact, for respondents who otherwise held pro-social views and engaged in pro-social (as opposed to egocentric) behaviors, information about HOAs actually decreased their likelihood of participation (Syunyaev 2016). For many Russians, it seems, the

HOA represents a Hegelian view of civil society: “a spectacle of excess, misery, and physical and social corruption” (Hegel 1820, 188).

All of that said, the HOA reform has not been an abject failure. The key factor in the “success” of an HOA is the ability of the members to mobilize sufficient “social capital” to ward off rent-seekers (whether from above, from below or from the side) (Borisova and Polishchuk 2009). Successful associations are able to increase the aesthetic quality, the security and the overall maintenance of their buildings (Vihavainen 2009). But successful HOAs are rare, even an ever-growing majority of urban residents are now part of one. Municipalities have taken advantage of citizens’ reluctance to create ersatz-HOAs, which city-linked interests control and exploit, further undermining the ethos of the reform itself. Overall, though, the lack of buy-in both from masses and from meso-level elites appears to have contributed to the decision by the government to back off a free-market approach to housing in favor of greater state involvement (Khmelnitskaya 2014).

### **The Monotowns**

Perhaps nowhere is the argument about ‘aggressive immobility’ more clearly suggested than in the case of Russia’s monotowns – *monogoroda*, in Russian, a strange bastardization of terms, equally awkward in both Russian and English, that denotes a city heavily reliant on a single industry. The country is dotted with them, often but not always in isolated locations, and they are among the clearest symbols of the burden that Soviet-era industrialization has placed on the shoulders of contemporary Russia (Hill and Gaddy 2003). The challenge that they pose to the state – the risk (indeed, inevitability) of social dislocation if (when) local industries falter, the cost of maintaining services to communities that would never have been built in a market economy – is not new. But until relatively recently, the post-Soviet Russian state never had the wherewithal even to consider a solution.

That began to change in the 2008-9 Russian economic ‘crisis’, itself an offshoot of the global financial crisis that emanated from Wall Street. Russia entered the crisis on a high, with robust reserves and bulging coffers, and buoyed by the fact that this crisis, at least, was not of its own making; indeed, there was nothing intrinsic in the structure or performance of Russian industry itself that created the sharp downturn in economic production – which is most of the reason why the recovery was equally sharp. Confident in its position, the government leaned on regional leaders and industrial magnates to absorb as much of the pain as possible, while shielding ordinary Russians from employment shocks; thus, compensation fell but unemployment remained relatively stable. But the monotowns emerged as a particular problem. These communities, vulnerable in the best of times, were hit heavily even by relatively minor changes in income. What’s more, the tycoons who had been running the local factories for years in large measure as charity operations – because the state had no contingency plan for the residents of the factories closed down – found that their own patience was wearing thin. It was Putin’s patience that mattered, however: in one of these monotowns, Pikalevo, he famously threw a pen at Oleg Deripaska, forcing him to rescind an earlier plan to shutter a cement factory.

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the government declared its intention to act. It drew up a list of monotowns and began to draw up plans to diversify some of them and evacuate others. The state mortgage agency was drafted in to help figure out how to get residents out of worthless homes and give them enough money to relocate and buy in new, more economically promising climes. At one point, such a plan was even drawn up for Tol'iatti, the car-manufacturing city of more than 700,000 residents. The residents, however, were having none of it. Protests in Pikalevo, Baikalsk and elsewhere demanded not support for relocation, but that the government force the oligarchs to keep the factories open, at whatever cost. The reasons for wanting to remain go deeper than simply an affinity for one's home (though that matters, too): in these towns and cities, people know how to get things done; elsewhere, they don't (Aliab'eva 2014).

Thus, despite acknowledging the obvious – that Russia's Soviet-era monotowns are unsustainable and impose unreasonable social and economic costs on the state – the Russian state has found it preferable to continue to subsidize them (and to risk elite discontent by forcing private enterprises to internalize those subsidies, in some cases), rather than to risk the social upheaval would result from their disbanding (Crowley 2016). In this case at least – although the pattern holds across the socio-economic structure of the country – it is not only the state that has become addicted to rents; significant (and significantly influential) parts of the population have also floated their individual livelihoods on a sea of rent-saturated liquidity.

To a certain extent, the problem will resolve itself: Those young people who can, leave the monotowns at the first opportunity, pursue education in the larger cities and, generally, don't return (Pis'mennaia and Liutova 2011). The remaining population will thus fade away, and with it both the towns themselves and the problem faced by the state; allowing that process to run its course is, evidently, preferable to an intervention that would both speed it up and ease the burden on those left behind (and their migratory descendants, who end up caring for them).

Unlike in the cases discussed earlier, however, in which there was a surprising community of interest among grassroots and mid-level resisters, here there was nothing of the kind. Both business owners and regional elites would, by most accounts, prefer to see the government carry through on its initial plans to close the towns down. Regional and municipal leaders recognized that, "of course, in the long run there is nothing that can be done" for the monotowns; they railed against the "maniacal desire of the [federal] bureaucrats to find jobs for absolutely everyone in the monotowns right there, right in those towns" (Koz'min 2013). In this case, at least, reform is stymied by the collusion of the masses, who don't want to move, and the ruling elite, who want to move them but are afraid to try.

## Discussion

If power is a learning process, the first question we ought to ask is whether anyone is learning anything.

The state does not appear to learn from failure, but nor do citizens learn from success: the (relative) success of the USE does not provide a transferable example of the potential of institutional reform; the successes of some HOAs says nothing about the potential for others to succeed, and so on. There does

seem to be a clear understanding on the part of both masses and less-than-ruling elites that resistance is not futile: even if the undesirable reforms are implemented, it is possible to maintain enough room for maneuver to make them less disruptive (and also less effective).

How to understand the learning process on the part of the state is more difficult. It may, of course, be that there is no learning going on whatsoever: that the domains are sufficiently far removed in the bureaucratic apparatus and even within the government's own compartmentalized thinking that it never occurs to, say, a housing reformer that one might learn lessons from the difficulties of education reform – that Zurabov never sat down with Filippov for a bit of comparative SWOT analysis.

The lack of a what we might think of as a robust learning process – one that would allow conclusions about the distribution of power to be aggregated and communicated reliably across the polity – is consistent with our concept of Russia as a poorly institutionalized environment. Institutions are, after all, the crystallization of social knowledge about likely outcomes (Giddens 1984). Thus, perhaps learning is overrated – or, rather, that kind of direct learning is not necessarily what we should be looking for.

Following Wintrobe's (1998) intuition that an autocrat might seek to provide public goods if it both boosts his public legitimacy and allows for more rent extraction from the economy, Forrat (2012) argues for using the authoritarian welfare state as a window into the autocrat's own thinking about his relationship to society. What, from the autocrat's point of view, does the welfare state produce? How does it boost his power? How does it constrain him? How are those costs and benefits managed over time? Some of the cases described here pertain to the welfare state directly, but I would argue that Forrat's extension can be extended still further, both to other domains of the state-society relationship, and to the other side of the coin: what, from the citizen's point of view, does the state produce?

Let us take another look at the first two cases. In the higher-education case, the reform went through in the end and has been implemented, but parents' and students' behavior has not changed (at least not nearly to the degree desired), but has simply shifted venue; more vexingly, the government was forced to implement a second policy to give select universities the right to be different, undermining the very principles on which the reform was built. A similar story confronts us in the cash-for-benefits case: resistance both from *l'gotniki* and regional leaders eviscerated the reform. In both cases, the state's efforts at reform were undermined by a strikingly similar logic. Both grassroots and mid-level elite constituents saw the reforms as threatening precisely because they were formal-institutional in nature, embedding life-critical transactions in an impersonalized framework, after decades of experience had shown that personalized frameworks work. In most other circumstances, the relationships between these grassroots and mid-elite actors would have been adversarial, and even here they were not exactly collaborative, but faced with a 'rationalizing' central state they found themselves on the same side of the barricades.

The housing case is different, both because the anxieties were different and because the communities of interest were different. Mid-level elites were interested not in no reform, but in partial-reform, which represented an opportunity for them to prosper – so long as mass actors themselves remained on the sidelines. It is not my purpose here to suggest that these municipal-level authorities actively encouraged residents not to commit to the HOA reform (although there is some evidence to this effect). As the

researchers cited above have shown, there was sufficient reason for ordinary citizens to find the HOAs a difficult and unprofitable arrangement, mostly because it forced them to pursue their private welfare in collective rather than individual action – and collective action is always and everywhere difficult. Here, then, it was the confluence of behavior, if not of interests, that led to the reform's demise.

And then there is the monotowns case, which differs still further. Here, there was no confluence of interests or behavior between mass actors and mid-level elites. Indeed, mid-level elites seemed to be the only ones interested in seeing the state carry through on the reform it had initially promised. But the promise of resistance from below – on the part of citizens loath to give up their social networks – was enough to change the federal government's point of view.

## Conclusions

So, what lessons emerge? There are at least three structural factors we can discern from these cases.

The aggressive immobility of Russians – the learned reliance on personalized (rather than impersonal) problem-solving, the privileging of proximate resources and individual action rather than abstract law and collective action – is enough to stop any reform that falls foul of these sensibilities. Thus, the first structural factor of Russian power we might discern is the enduring power of the lack of structure. An argument can be had about 'who started' – and the body of literature that follows on from Hellman suggests that it was the elite – but the suggestion here is that Russia has arrived at a situation in which *both* elites and masses resist the further 'open-access order' restructuring of the political economy.

Second, and perhaps unsurprisingly, many in the meso-level elite share this predilection for personalized exchange, and this often creates a tacit commonality of interest with mass actors. What is more surprising about this observation is that, when the interests of the masses are aligned against the state's proposed reforms, mid-level elites – though theoretically part of Putin's 'vertical of power' – tend to line up with the masses, and not with the government. The fact that bottom-up informality exerts a stronger pull on mid-level elites than top-down authority is thus the second structural factor.

Lastly, when the interests of mass actors and mid-level elites diverge – and when those mass actors hold their views sufficiently dear – the interests of the ruling elite and the masses converge. Whether in the monotowns case here, or in the long-running skirmishes with Russia's automotive associations or any number of other cases described elsewhere, the state has proven itself unwilling to risk large-scale social unrest and dislocation, even if this means undermining policy objectives of abandoning them altogether. Thus, the ability of public sentiment to force the government to abandon a material policy, against the interests of the state's more proximate constituents (i.e., the elite), is the third structural factor.

Based as it is on a somewhat haphazard meta-analysis of existing research, this essay raises as many questions as it answers. Within Russian case itself, some of the arguments here seem overly simplistic. Most importantly, not all Russians are likely to be equally 'aggressively immobile', and more research is needed to determine the cognitive and social factors that might make individuals more or less likely to invest in processes of reform and place their faith in impersonal institutions. (For some early indications

in this direction, concerning the limits to muddling through, see Tertytchnaya & Lankins 2016.) A better structured set of case studies might also help shed more light on the thresholds of tolerance, both for masses and for elites at various levels.

A separate set of questions relates to the extent to which the ideas here should be expected to pertain outside Russia. Just as the ‘partial reform equilibrium’ idea originated in the post-Soviet space but elucidates the problems with large-scale reform processes more broadly, there is no reason to believe that ‘aggressive immobility’ begins and ends at the Russian border. Rather, the concept should be applicable wherever populations have had to cope with large scale dislocation and institutional breakdown, and where that breakdown has not been followed by the relatively rapid restoration of a reliable institutional order. To be absolutely clear, the argument here is *not* that Russians are inherently aggressively immobile. Rather, aggressive immobility is the product of the experiences that Russians have endured; different experiences should be expected to have produced different behavioral outcomes even in Russia, while the same experiences ought to produce similar outcomes in other countries. (For some ideas in comparative perspective, see Berenson 2018.)

On a separate note, it seems remarkable that throughout the cases described here, there never appears to be any real attempt at persuasion. At no point does Putin (the one part of the state Russians *do* trust) come out with a full-throated endorsement of any of these policies. As analysts, we cannot know why Putin stays on the sidelines in these fights; perhaps he is not sure he will win them and wants to remain untarnished, or perhaps he simply doesn’t care. But we can put ourselves in the shoes of ordinary Russian citizens and ask what this silence looks like from their point of view. What structural factor of Russian power might a Russian citizen discern from the fact that the one part of the state that matters – the president – seems not to believe in the state’s ability to produce public goods?



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